

O.C. lawmaker's panel seeks water crisis answers

Pat Brennan, green living, environment editor

Posted: 08/25/2009 10:50 AM

FOUNTAIN VALLEY — They called themselves Orange County's water "buffaloes," and on Friday took turns describing to a state water-crisis panel a variety of projects meant to boost local supplies.

Desalinating seawater. Purifying sewer-water. Smart sprinklers, public service announcements, higher rates for customers who use too much.

Among "buffaloes" — the water-supply experts who reliably gather at such meetings to discuss policy — Orange County is known for its water-saving innovations.

So local entrepreneurs and water agency officials got a chance to show off their projects to six members of the state assembly's Committee on Regional Approaches to Addressing the State's Water Crisis, led by Jose Solorio, D-Santa Ana.

"Right now, our state is in crisis regarding water," Solorio said. "That's why it is necessary for an assembly committee to go throughout the state to find best practices for water conservation and resources. What better place to start than Orange County?"

The legislators plan to conduct as many as four such hearings a year in various parts of the state, he said.

There was plenty of talk at the hearing, at Orange County Water District headquarters, about seawater desalination. Scott Maloni, vice president of Poseidon Resources, said his company's controversial proposal to build a desalination plant in Huntington Beach is "on schedule to break ground next year."

The \$300 million plant would produce 50 million gallons of drinking-water per day. But it has stirred opposition among some activist groups who fear it could harm the marine environment.

The legislators also took a tour of Orange County's Groundwater Replenishment System, which pushes sewer water through powerful filters to produce 70 million gallons of purified water per day — half injected into the ground as a barrier to intrusion by seawater, half sent to settling ponds in Anaheim to percolate into the county's underground aquifer.

"There's a tour at the end of the hearing," Michael Markus, the water district's general manager, told the panel, inviting them to "taste the water as well."

The legislators also heard about Smart irrigation systems, which rely on weather satellites as well as pre-loaded information about plants, soil type, slope and other factors to release as little water as possible and still keep plants healthy.

They learned from Paul Jones, general manager at the Irvine Ranch Water District, how his agency identifies excessive water users among its customers, and charges them higher water rates under a "tiered" system designed to encourage conservation.

And during lunch, the water buffaloes received an update on efforts to work out a solution to problems on the California Bay Delta, where protection of fish, such as the threatened delta smelt, is placing limits on a big part of the state's supply. One idea is some combination of canals and tunnels to move the water so large pumps would cause less harm the fish and their habitat.

Supplies for both humans and wildlife must be balanced, said Keith Coolidge, chief deputy director of the CALFED Bay-Delta Program.

"We cannot run roughshod over the ecosystem in order to provide water to the state's economy," he said.

Several of the speakers said ever-tightening supplies in drought-stricken Southern California will push the region to find new ways to add to the water supply, and to save more of the water we have.